Domesticating Drink by Catherine Murdock

In her social history of alcohol during the Prohibition period of American history, Murdock outlines the pivotal role female drinkers played in both the passing of the Eighteenth and Twenty-First Amendments. She focuses on four specific themes in her writing: the omnipresence of gender in the debate over drink, the female role in moderate male consumption, the importance of beer, wine, and spirits to American sociability, and the heavy nimbus of politics that surrounded alcohol in the critical years between the Civil War and the Great Depression (3). After establishing the reasons many supported Prohibition, Murdock cited an important statistic: only 20 percent of the alcoholic population was female (4). Despite the lack of female drinkers, women’s groups soon realized that prohibition would be impossible without women’s political empowerment (4). It is also important that Murdock established the presence of women consuming alcohol in advertisements, political cartoons, and photographs. With an unquestionable female role in the alcoholic world established, Murdock argued that women not only did not fit the mold of the pure and pious American woman, but their consumption of alcohol played a far more public role in the repeal campaign that ended the Noble Experiment forever (5). By examining related women’s issues like suffrage, Murdock

Notes on Chapter 1:

“Victorian here defines the period from the Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century” (12).

“The suffrage amendment did not pass because of the hard work and noble sentiments of a handful of dedicated, liberal-minded feminists. It passed because legislators in Congress and in thirty-six states, backed by several million male and female voters, voted for it (38). Many of those who supported female suffrage did so in order to further their own agenda, namely prohibition.

Her thesis is in part that clearly, the prohibition was a huge part of the Nineteenth Amendment’s ultimate success. The Eighteenth Amendment thus passed without the votes of most American women. But what was the female role in the passage of prohibition?

“Both women suffrage and prohibition challenged traditional male public behavior. Supporters of the two amendments considered alcohol and politics pathologically intertwined: both male drinking and male politics required female intervention.” (39). Women felt they would eliminate male drunkenness associated with voting.

“Politics, masculinity, and alcohol were a powerful triumvirate in the early years of the twentieth century.” (41)

Women accused drinking politicians of opposing woman suffrage.

Chapter 2: Domestic Drinking in Victorian America

While the cult of domesticity trapped women within the home, they had unprecedented authority within the home (43).

Drinking was normally a public, male activity, but women threatened this ideal due to drinking in the home.

Men were the majority of the drunken population (47).

Advertising made cocktails seem to be the respectable drink of choice for women.

Murdock sets out to dispel the myth that women did not drink much during the Victorian age. Despite a dearth of primary sources on these women drinking, Murdock hypothesized that women drank in a manner at odds with contemporaneous masculine patterns (51).

“Women had available to them alcoholic medication, recipes for alcoholic beverages and foods, and a substantial body of literature detailing when and how alcohol might be integrated into domestic life.” (60) Murdock argued that this was a true statement, but did not imply women drank to excess. Thus a fair argument can be made that women had knowledge of how to incorporate alcohol into their domestic sphere while avoiding the pitfalls of saloon drunkenness.

In her chapter on federal prohibition, Murdock does an excellent job in pointing out the myriad loopholes in both the Eighteenth Amendment and the accompanying Volstead Act. For example, one loophole of the amendment was that people were not prohibited from purchasing liquor. Then the question became how to define intoxicating liquors. The Volstead Act defined as intoxicating anything with more than 0.5 percent alcohol, yet this same act permitted the possession and consumption of alcohol in the home. It was these loopholes and controversies that would result in a reaction Murdock deemed a “ringing silence” when prohibition was finally repealed.